

# Hezbollah Crossing Borders

The Case of Al-Qusayr





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## The Case of Al-Qusayr

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# A Cross Section of a History The Shia Community in Lebanon

## تواریخُ مُتَقاطِعةُ حِصةُ الشیعة منها فی لبنان

UMAM Documentation and Research (UMAM D&R) is undertaking a history project in Lebanon entitled A Cross Section of a History. This project will create a space to explore and deepen understanding of the socio-political histories of specific communities within Lebanon - including the Shia, among others - to trace and explore their historical dynamics until today. Micro-level histories of individuals, families, and towns in Lebanon will be addressed, out of the belief that examination of these various histories will show the mosaic of personal and collective experiences of communities in Lebanon over history.

The title of the project "a cross section of a history" embodies this mission: by focusing on specific elements of Lebanon's collective, cacophonous history, we aim to illuminate unique and collective dynamics, identities, and transformations that help to explain the Lebanon we are seeing today. This project aims to directly engage with community members around Lebanon and in the diaspora, as well as academics and experts. The outputs of the project will be a research report and collections of archival material.



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The Modern History of Syria Initiative is a collective effort composed of researchers, academics, documentarians, and Syrian activists committed to the preservation, tracing, and documentation of Syrian history following the onset of the Syrian revolution in March 2011. Our approach is characterized by objectivity, scholarly rigor, and a methodological framework that distances itself from any interpretation, distortion, or falsification of this history. We rely on open sources and oral history, drawing upon firsthand accounts or those intimately connected to the events to ensure accuracy in our historical endeavors.

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## Introduction

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The Syrian regime has adopted a systematic approach of violence to suppress the Syrian revolutionary movement since the outbreak of protests in March 2011. With the aim of securing a loyal popular base that supported the regime in the face of growing protests that demanded political reform and democratic change at that time, the official Syrian discourse played on sectarian fears by describing the emerging Syrian opposition as a sectarian movement that threatened the country's minorities. This strategy worked to sectarianize the conflict by arming local minorities and garnering essential support from the regime's regional allies: Iran and Hezbollah.

Through the war, Syria has continued to be the primary strategic ally of Iran and has continued to play a crucial role in supplying and supporting Iran's proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah.

The evolution of the conflict in Syria since the 2011 outbreak of protests also led to the crystallization of the concept of "Useful Syria." This concept, introduced by Bashar al-Assad in a 2015 interview, outlined geographic parts of Syria deemed "Useful Syria," to be of greater importance to the regime in its attempt

to maintain control over key parts of the country.<sup>(1)</sup> This stage was framed as one of the tools to achieve the strategy of the Syrian regime and its allies, which focused on gaining control over major cities, particularly Homs and Damascus in central Syria, and pushing the armed opposition towards the northern regions of Syria. The beginning of this stage can be traced back to the campaign by Hezbollah and the Syrian army on the city of al-Qusayr in May 2013. This campaign primarily aimed to cut supply lines for the armed opposition, besiege the city of Homs, and eliminate the opposition in the city, all undertaken following repeated failures of the Syrian army to seize control of the area.

As a result, looking at the dynamics around al-Qusayr region provides valuable insight into the relations between Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. Prior to 2011, the city, which is in the Homs district and near the Lebanese border, had a predominantly Sunni majority while its surrounding countryside was home to various religious communities. After government forces and their allies seized control of the city in June 2013, opposition supporters fled to other parts of the Qalamoun region that were under the control of opposition forces, while a significant portion of the population fled to Lebanon. Syrian authorities then imposed varying conditions for their return, allowing religious minorities to return directly,

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<sup>(1)</sup> In 2015, Bashar al-Assad introduced the concept of «Useful Syria» in one of his interviews, stating «field necessities dictate focusing on areas of greater importance at the expense of others deemed less valuable.» Geographically, "Useful Syria" refers to the following six provinces: Damascus, Rif Dimashq, Homs, Hama, Latakia, and Tartus. It is important to recall the response of Lokman Slim during an interview on Al Jazeera on September 29, 2015, where he stated, «the concept of "Useful Syria" cannot be explained outside the question: useful for whom and useful for what? [...] It is an area characterized by more sectarian and doctrinal homogeneity than other regions.» To view the complete interview and the concept of «Useful Syria» and its applications, see Al Jazeera, accessed on January 10, 2023, at 10:12.



while Sunni families found their return heavily restricted, with their final return deemed prohibited.

The city of al-Qusayr would once again rise in prominence in the Hezbollah-Syria relationship later during the civil war. In continual service of prioritizing "Useful Syria," the Syrian regime adopted the approach of undertaking local agreements with besieged cities and neighborhoods to compel local opposition and residents to leave their homes and migrate to areas controlled by the opposition. In 2016, the regime implemented such agreements with the city of Darayya, the neighborhoods of Al-Waer in Homs, and the eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo, all of which had suffered from shelling and siege. The objective was to transfer the residents and fighters to the province of Idlib, which was predominantly under the military control of the armed opposition, primarily represented by the group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. This scenario continued in 2017 through further agreements between Syrian Islamic oppositional factions, represented by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham on one side, and the Syrian army, Hezbollah, and Iran on the other. One such agreement covered four besieged cities: Zabadani, Madaya, both of which are in the countryside of Damascus and the majority of whose inhabitants are Sunni; and Kefraya and Al-Foua, both of which are in the countryside of Idlib and the majority of whose inhabitants are Shiites. This agreement, known as the Four Towns Agreement, stipulated that approximately 3,800 individuals, including opposition fighters, could leave the cities of Zabadani and Madaya and move north towards Idlib, while 8,000 individuals, including militia fighters loyal to the regime, could leave the cities of Kefraya and Al-Foua in the northern countryside of Idlib and move towards Aleppo and other areas controlled by the regime. This deal aimed to eliminate the last active opposition strongholds in the western Qalamoun area of Syria and secure almost the entire Lebanese border in favor of the Syrian regime and its allies.

In late April 2017, Damascus resettled pro-regime fighters and their families who had left Al-Foua and Kefraya in Al-Qusayr. While most villages and towns around Al-Qusayr had their inhabitants displaced, the city itself was transformed into barracks and military training centers for various Shia Islamic militias, including the Forces of Righteousness (Quwat al-Ridha). This militia, established back in 2014 with assistance from Hezbollah, holds significant influence and impact as a Syrian Shia militia.

The dynamics present in al-Qusayr reveal Hezbollah's deep involvement in the Syrian crisis and its direct military engagement. Its entry into the military operations exacerbated sectarian polarization in Syria, infusing the conflict with religious and sectarian dimensions. Hezbollah played a pivotal role in preventing the return of the city's residents, primarily linked to the strategic geopolitical importance of al-Qusayr. The city is located just about ten kilometers from a main transit point where most of Syria's international land routes converge and is less than 20 kilometers from the border with Lebanon, and is therefore vital to Hezbollah's military and security influence in the Hermel region. Consequently, Hezbollah fears that by allowing the local population to return to the city, there could come a resurgence of opposition activity that would threaten Hezbollah's aims to maintain control over the area, to secure its supply lines between Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, and to reinforce its military presence in Syria.

It is important to note that Hezbollah has a historic connection to the region of al-Qusayr through Syrians who hold Lebanese citizenship and live in several villages in the area, such as al-Diyabiya, al-Burhaniya, Safirjah, Hawayek, al-Masriya, al-Aqrabiya, al-Safsafa, and Zita. These individuals helped to support Hezbollah's military campaign to control these villages, which it has now fully seized.

The significance of this research lies in the fact that, nearly nine years after the Syrian government forces and Hezbollah took control of the al-Qusayr region in 2013, Hezbollah continues to hold significant power in the area. Hezbollah operates within the broader strategy of its Iranian ally in Syria, and al-Qusayr maintains special importance due to its distinctive geographical location. Moreover, Hezbollah leverages its control over the border areas with Lebanon in order to economically gain from smuggling activities. The challenges faced by the town are intricately linked to the demographic changes, particularly in the context of the Syrian government's policies hindering refugee return. These policies include continued security-oriented measures such as arbitrary arrests, military service obligations, control over properties and lands, economic fragility, and insufficient services. Therefore, al-Qusayr poses complex considerations regarding return, primarily tied to the demographic engineering process.

The primary focus of this research revolves around answering the question of what is the impact of Hezbollah's policies in consolidating its control over the al-Qusayr region in light of the overall Iranian strategy in Syria. Answering this central question requires addressing several related questions:

- What is the political, economic, and security significance of the al-Qusayr region?
- What changes have occurred in local economic patterns in al-Qusayr?
- Which actors effectively control al-Qusayr (security, military, economic)?
- How successful is Hezbollah's demographic change policy in controlling al-Qusayr?
- How does this policy align with Iran's strategy to enhance its influence in Syria?
- What are the boundaries of competition and

cooperation among the influential forces in Syria regarding the al-Qusayr region?

As for the research methodology, this research relies on a historical approach to study demographic changes in the al-Qusayr region and shifts in the local economic landscape. Additionally, an inductive approach was used to understand Hezbollah's strategy to reinforce its control over al-Qusayr, its position in the Iranian strategy in Syria, and the stance of Syrian authorities and their Russian ally on this strategy. This involved studying previous reports and research, along with information published in the media and on electronic platforms.

The study also relied on a series of I interviews that aimed to produce new data and establish connections between the results of the interviews and findings from the literature. These interviews were conducted at two main levels:

- Level one involved interviews with refugees, returnees, and internally displaced individuals from the al-Qusayr region. The objective was to assess their economic and social conditions and identify key challenges preventing their return to their respective areas, particularly in connection with the policies of the controlling powers in al-Qusayr.
- Level two involved interviews with activists, religious figures, community leaders, municipality employees, clerks of civil status, and tribal leaders. The goal was to understand the reality of demographic change policies, how they are implemented, their impact, and the changes in demographic distribution in al-Qusayr.

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## Conclusion

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Hezbollah first intervened in the early stages of the Syrian war, notably starting in the fall of 2011. It justified its involvement by citing extremist attacks against Syrian Shiites, while in reality, this intervention was aligned with Iran's strategy in Syria on one hand, and the existential connection between the fate of Hezbollah and the Syrian regime on the other. Hezbollah employed various forms of support, including technological, military, and human assistance.

However, Hezbollah's direct military intervention in Syria occurred in the spring of 2013 when Hezbollah decisively intervened in the battle for al-Qusayr in favor of the Syrian regime. This intervention was driven by a series of strategic reasons. First, it was related to the broader strategy of the Iranian axis to strengthen the Syrian regime, with al-Qusayr holding significant military importance to decisively settle the battle for Homs. Second, it was directly linked to Hezbollah's interests in securing the western borders of Damascus and Homs for its needed regional connections through Syria to Iraq and Iran. Hezbollah utilized the deep tribal connections that unify Shiites on both sides of the border to rally its popular base to engage in a protracted war and justify the substantial losses that would later result from its involvement in the armed conflict along the Syrian front.

After Hezbollah gained complete control of al-Qusayr, it transformed the area into an open border crossing for various smuggling operations, becoming a lucrative source of profit for both Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. Smuggling operations in al-Qusayr range across various industries, spanning various types of weapons; fuel such as gasoline, diesel, and household gas; food products such as vegetables and fruits; household items such as furniture; and drugs and tobacco. Al-Qusayr became an open gateway but under a highly organized system. Traditional smuggling was no longer present, and Hezbollah, in coordination with the Fourth Division of the Syrian army, began entering and exiting large convoys. Notably, Hezbollah and the Fourth Division turned al-Qusayr, especially the areas west of the Orontes River, into a specialized district for the production and smuggling of cannabis. The drug is then shipped to Lebanon for processing and then exported to various countries, in addition to flooding the Syrian market. Therefore, al-Qusayr serves as a crucial link in the routes of cannabis and other drug smuggling in Syria, extending northwards from al-Qusayr towards Syrian ports and southwards towards the southern region, Jordan, and ultimately Saudi Arabia.

Given the military, economic, and security importance of the al-Qusayr region for Hezbollah, and its strategic significance in securing supply lines within a strategic route connecting the Syrian and Lebanese borders—a route Iran seeks to secure in collaboration with Hezbollah—the latter has employed systematic demographic change policies to strengthen its grip on the al-Qusayr region. These policies manifested in well-planned displacement operations carried out by Hezbollah against the local population. The outlines of these operations began to emerge shortly after Hezbollah's takeover of villages that had a mixed Shiite-Sunni population. The tactics used involved preventing the return of Syrian refugees and exploiting

the absence of al-Qusayr residents from their city along sectarian lines. Hezbollah capitalized on the difficult circumstances faced by the displaced residents due to their forced migration and refugee and worked to seize and purchase their lands.

The significant financing, extensive missionary efforts, and both material and moral inducements played a crucial role in Hezbollah gaining the support of al-Qusayr residents from various segments and, notably, the Sunni population. Hezbollah played a significant role in implementing these policies, which began before the outbreak of the war and were part of the Iranian strategy for social penetration in Syria. These efforts intensified when Bashar al-Assad assumed power and were marked by organized Shiite proselytization campaigns led by the Iranian embassy in Damascus and its cultural attaché in Aleppo at that time.

Iran and its allies in Syria then exploited the severe economic and social crisis in 2011 to solidify their position through social penetration and increasing the number of Shiites in Syria. This serves two purposes: first, making Shiism the vanguard of Iranian ideology in Syria, and second, having a significant Shiite population in Syria provides a continuous pretext for Iranian intervention. Iran's attempt to increase the number of Shiites in Syria stems from the fact that the percentage of the Shiite sect in Syria is approximately 1%, which is comparatively much lower than its population in countries like Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon.

The process of demographic change in the al-Qusayr region began in earnest after 2013, after Hezbollah became the dominant force in al-Qusayr. Some families in al-Qusayr converted to the Shiite sect and changed their family names. This was driven by their desire to benefit from the facilitations provided by the party, whether in terms of receiving assistance, party cards with financial benefits, discounts on purchases,

or the ability to travel to and from al-Qusayr without restrictions. While this aligns with the Iranian strategy in Syria to dominate Syrian decisions and establish a long-term presence in the country achieved through solidifying its social, economic, and military presence, it is also part of a specific strategy employed by Hezbollah to ensure its security and domination. This strategy is embedded in a larger plan for military and security control over the western regions in the outskirts of Damascus and Homs, which intersect with the group's strongholds in Lebanon. This provides the party with supply lines, control over crossings, and the smuggling economy to fund its activities.

Therefore, al-Qusayr holds a particular significance in this project due to its geographical location, demographic composition, and Hezbollah's ability to socially infiltrate it by virtue of its control over the region. This is distinct from the broader Iranian strategy, which focuses on demographic change in major urban centers, especially in Damascus, Aleppo, and Deir ez-Zor, given their urban importance in the long run. Despite the significant changes discussed in sectarian distribution, these operations still fall under the scope of political Shiaization, with the economic and security conditions playing a crucial role in the speed of its spread, and the continuation of current circumstances required for extended periods to solidify its ideological dimension.